

## **Ariel Ashkenazi: Teaching with Purpose, Responsibility, and Heart**

If you enter the Sephardic Academy of Manhattan – The SAM School – and walk into first year teacher Ariel Ashkenazi’s classroom, you’ll notice something immediately: students are waiting for him.

Not just physically present- but engaged, expectant. They know his class will be different. There will be energy, humor, and what he calls “spice.” But beneath that liveliness is something much deeper- a philosophy of teaching shaped by responsibility, reflection, and experience.

It’s not where he started.

### **An Unlikely Beginning**

Originally from Israel, Ashkenazi brings with him not only a rich cultural background, but a deep connection to tradition and identity that subtly informs his teaching.

Still, he is the first to admit that his own early experiences in school did not inspire him to enter education.

“There wasn’t much depth,” he recalls. “They were teachers, not professionals. They weren’t invested.”

For a long time, he didn’t see himself in a classroom at all. His interests leaned toward serious Judaic study rather than teaching. And then there was something else- something that pushed him even further away from the profession.

A close friend of his had been repeatedly abused by a teacher. The impact was lasting.

“To this day, my friend struggles with the results of this abuse,” Ashkenazi says. “That teacher should be in jail.”

Witnessing what happened to his friend left him with a sense of disgust toward teaching. In his mind, the classroom carried the potential for harm as much as for good.

### **The Weight of the Role**

Over time, however, that discomfort evolved into a deep awareness of what teaching truly demands.

“When parents send you their children,” he says, “they’re entrusting you with their *neshamot*- their souls.”

That belief initially made him hesitate. The responsibility felt enormous.

But another friend reframed it in a way that changed everything:

“If you’re thinking about it like that,” the friend told him, “then you belong in the classroom.”

It was a turning point.

## **A Journey Across Worlds**

Ashkenazi’s path to teaching reflects a blend of Israeli roots and diverse educational experiences.

He studied in Israel before ultimately following his rebbe’s advice to attend Ner Yisrael in Baltimore.

“I thought it would be healthy to experience a different culture,” he says. He stayed for two years, describing the experience as both enriching and formative.

Life continued to unfold in unexpected ways. In 2019, after Sukkot, he and his family came to Manhattan and visited Safra Shul, where they met Rabbi Ariel Mizrahi. The connection was immediate.

Rabbi Mizrahi extended an open invitation to return anytime- a relationship that continued over the years, even while Ashkenazi spent time back in Israel.

Later, when Ashkenazi began exploring teaching opportunities, he turned to Rabbi Mizrahi for guidance. Where, he asked, would he find the strongest support?

The answer: SAM. The Stanley I Chera SAM School.

## **Learning to Teach—and Leading**

When Ariel Ashkenazi first stepped into the classroom, he carried real uncertainty. He questioned his ability to plan effectively, execute lessons with clarity, and manage a room full of students. But that uncertainty didn’t last long.

With the combined support of SAM and the JNTP–Azrieli Fellowship (JAF), his growth was rapid and striking.

As Tammy Masar, Judaic Studies Director for K–8, reflects:

*“Ariel began unsure of himself—hesitant in his ability to plan, execute, and manage a classroom. In a short time, he has grown into a confident, creative educator who inspires his students, plans with clarity and purpose, and embraces feedback with openness and*

*immediate action. The partnership with JNTP and Azrieli has been instrumental in helping him become a star educator.”*

This transformation did not happen in isolation. It was fueled by a school that invested deeply in his success and a fellowship that provided the tools, mentorship, and professional framework to elevate his practice.

Despite years of experience teaching adults, transitioning to younger students presented a new challenge. “I had no idea how to teach students,” he admits.

The **JNTP–Azrieli Fellowship (JAF)** proved to be transformative. Designed to support early-career Jewish educators, the program combines mentorship, structured training, and a collaborative professional community. Participants can earn graduate credits and a certificate in Effective Teaching Strategies- adding both practical skills and academic grounding to their work.

“At the beginning, it was overwhelming,” Ashkenazi recalls. “So many ideas, so many approaches.”

But over time, those ideas translated into action. Through coaching, classroom observation, and consistent feedback, he refined his teaching, built confidence, and developed clear, intentional strategies.

“As the year went on, I started to see how everything actually helps,” he says. “I feel very supported.”

The fellowship didn’t just help him adjust- it accelerated his professional growth, moving him from instinctive teaching to thoughtful, skilled instruction. Today, that growth is evident in every aspect of his classroom, from the structure of his lessons to the energy of his students.

## **Seeing Every Student**

What distinguishes Ashkenazi as an educator is not just his energy, but his awareness.

He pays close attention to each student—not only academically, but socially and emotionally. He is constantly asking himself:

- What does this student need to succeed?
- What support do they need beyond the material?
- How can I help them grow as a person?

That attentiveness is intentional. It stems directly from his belief that teaching is a profound trust and one that cannot be taken lightly.

### **The Classroom He Needed**

In many ways, Ashkenazi has become the teacher he never had.

His classroom is engaged where his own experience felt flat. It is thoughtful where his felt uninvested. It is safe, where he once saw how damaging a classroom could be.

And perhaps that is what his students respond to most.

“They’re waiting for the class,” he says. “They appreciate it.”

For Ashkenazi, that is the reward: showing up, making learning meaningful, and knowing that what he does each day matters.

“It’s about doing something good,” he says.

And in his classroom, that intention is unmistakable.